

# Setting 'best' for literacy

And tests every eight weeks also help, says think tank. **Adi Bloom** reports



Primary pupils should be grouped by ability and tested every eight weeks to ensure they are keeping up with the rest of the group, a new report claims.

*Fade or Flourish*, compiled by the Social Market Foundation, the pro-market think tank, suggests that literacy in primary schools is best taught in small, ability-based sets. Children would be assessed in September, then placed into groups. Reading levels would then be tested every two months, and pupils would change sets, depending on how they compare to their peers.

Claudia Wood, a research fellow for the foundation and author of the report, said: "There's a lot of controversy around setting and streaming. But teachers teach better when they have a group with similar abilities."

"In a mixed-ability class, high-ability kids can be left to read by themselves while teachers help the low-ability kids. But if all the abilities in a group are the same, then you can pitch the teaching at the right level."

Alternatively, she suggests, pupils should sit at different tables according to their ability. The teacher would then move from table to table, setting separate work for each group.

"All these suggestions require greater trust in teachers' ability," said Ms Wood. "Children progress at different rates so ability groups that don't change throughout the year are pointless. Teachers know the children really well, and know exactly what progress each child is making."

But Sue Palmer, literacy consultant, questions whether this is a useful approach.

"You're engendering a competitive, win-or-lose philosophy at a very early age," she said. "Testing doesn't make children literate. It just makes them able to pass tests. "Literacy is one area in which all must have prizes. If you go in for winners and losers, society is the overall loser."

These recommendations are based on the Success for All literacy programme, developed in the United States. It is used in around 2,000 American schools. Controlled experiments suggest that it has had a significant effect on literacy levels. The scheme teaches literacy in daily 90-minute blocks, compared with the one-hour lessons outlined by the UK's national literacy strategy. Within such groups, children work in pairs, helping one another to read.

The report, which will be published next week, also recommends that pupils who begin to fall behind should be given intensive bursts of one-to-one teaching.

"The kids aren't stupid," said Ms Wood. "They know who's in a higher or a lower set. But everyone moves between groups."

"There's no stigma attached to lower groups. Kids who are struggling are given intensive catch-up lessons, so there's no sense that they're stuck in a rut."

And parents would be encouraged to become more involved. The foundation recommends that schools invite parents into the classroom, to help children during literacy hour. This would also enable parents to use complementary approaches when reading with their children at home.

Steve Sinnott, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, attacked the report.

"Those who pontificate about how classrooms should be organised should stop it," he said. "The professionalism of teachers should be respected, rather than any group suggesting there's a single method that's appropriate to every child in every setting."

Good story:

Ebor Gardens primary has been using Success for All for six years to promote literacy

## 'We call it: teaching them at their own ability'

Denise Maruszczak acknowledges that streaming pupils is not a particularly fashionable way to teach. The literacy co-ordinator at Ebor Gardens primary, in Leeds, said: "We don't actually say streaming: We say teaching them at their own ability.

"If you try to meet the needs of a wide range, you won't hit anybody's spot. But if the children are at the same level, they can all participate fully. There are very few behaviour problems - it's not rocket science."

Ebor Gardens has been following the Success for All scheme, recommended by the Social Market Foundation in its new report, for the past six years. Ms Maruszczak believes that it has enabled her to focus on the particular needs of her pupils, 64 per cent of whom receive free school meals.

"We teach sparky younger children with more experienced older ones," she said. "The older children feel they're bringing their experience into the group. They learn to express themselves, to debate, perhaps argue with their teacher. Though not too much."

Success for All includes regular assessment, enabling children to move sets. Ms Maruszczak said that this, too, could be seen as controversial.

"We feel testing is necessary," she said. "Sats are stressful, because they're the culmination of a year of work. Our children are assessed every six weeks. It's part of their school life. It's about them owning their own learning, feeling they're moving on."

Farahnaz Neda, 10, is happy to be taught with younger pupils. "It's nice to know lots of people," she said. "Sometimes I play with the little children at break, and sometimes I hang around with mates from my class. It's good to have a choice."